

### **Message: At the end of the day**

In the musical Les Misérables the tragic character of Fantine is introduced in the song 'At the end of the day' – it's sung by the workers and the foreman in the factory...

*At the end of the day, you're another day older  
And that's all you can say for the life of the poor  
It's a struggle, it's a war  
And there's nothing that anyone's giving  
One more day standing about  
What is it for?*

...

*At the end of the day you get nothing for nothing  
Sitting flat on your butt doesn't buy any bread.  
There are children back at home  
And the children have got to be fed  
And you're lucky to be in a job  
And in a bed  
And we're counting our blessings!*

Life, for so many people, is – and has always been – a struggle and a war. People who struggle to make ends meet, people who live payday to payday.

Many people in the richest countries in the world today are only one or two pay cheques away from becoming homeless. We are – as the television news keeps telling us – in the midst of a cost of living crisis, and while unemployment is low, for many people job security, is something only their parents – or grandparents – knew.

My first permanent job was in 1986. I went to work for Australian National Industries which was a diversified industrial company. It owned several foundries, a train carriage manufacturer, a dockyard, a computer supplier, a steel manufacturer and several others. I was trainee accountant at head office. It was an old-fashioned place to work. There was an executive dining room, and there were tea ladies who pushed trolleys between the desks.

Being an employee at head office, I was invited to the annual dinner, where speeches were made, and long service awards given. At my first dinner, there were a handful of men who received 50 year service awards – they were all foundry workers, who'd somehow managed to get a job at the foundry in 1936

as fifteen year olds, and stayed there their whole lives. World War 2 had come along, but foundry workers were essential to the war effort, so theirs was a protected occupation. And they'd managed to survive 50 years of industrial accidents and 50 years of exposure to fumes.

They got a handshake from the managing director, a gold watch, and company superannuation equivalent to 75% of their wage until they died – which, from the look of them, might not have been too far off. They shook hands, nodded to whatever it was the managing director said to them and walked back to their table and sat down.

Of course, the managing director's annual salary was worth more than all of them together would earn in a year. I'm pretty sure his expense account would have been greater than the take home pay of any single foundry worker. He'd only been there a couple of years and he'd never been exposed to the rigours and dangers of working in a foundry.

The foundry workers, of course, had some overtime. As did I, as a young wage earner. The harder we worked, the more we got paid. A ten-hour day, meant two hours extra at time and a half. A full weekend's work – which I did a few times meant two hours at time and a half and fourteen hours at double time! Wow!

Of course, the managing director didn't get overtime... he got something even better: performance bonuses.

The harder we worked, the more we got paid. The longer we worked, the more we got paid. And we did work hard. Turning down overtime was frowned on. And those tea ladies plied the aisles so you didn't even have to leave work to get yourself a cup of tea.

The that's the way of the world, isn't it? Executive salaries are many, many times the wages of most of the workers, and even among executives, only a few will be good enough to make it to the top. The harder you work, the longer you work, the more you get paid.

The way of the world.

*At the end of the day, you get nothing for nothing*

*Sitting flat on your butt doesn't buy any bread.*

*There are children back at home*

*And the children have got to be fed...*

And if you can't work, or can't work the long hours, or lack the skills, or have a disability, or have family to care for, or are sick, or don't have access to education, or don't have the connections... well, too bad. At the end of the day, you get nothing for nothing.

And then along comes Jesus and tells us about something different. Not about the way of the world, but about the kingdom of heaven.

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.” (20:1)

And we should be clear that Jesus is talking about the kingdom of heaven – he's not giving a lesson on industrial relations. He's not giving us a model of how we should reward effort, or telling us that we should be communists – he is teaching us about God's kingdom.

The story begins not with the workers, but with the landowner. He goes out to find the workers early in the morning – first light or close to it – and that would have meant going to the marketplace or the town square, where labourers would hire themselves out.

Now apparently, first century vineyards were not ideal workplaces. The vineyards themselves were on hillsides which were typically rocky, so they had to be improved by clearing rocks, and carrying good soil and fertiliser up to them. And there wasn't any shade. Or any convenient water. And then there was the tending and pruning of the vines, and eventually the manual harvest and carrying baskets of grapes down the hill.

Nevertheless, it was work. And it paid. By working in vineyards, you could earn enough to live on – and even support a family.

So the landowner came to an agreement with the workers that morning: to pay them a denarius – the usual daily wage.

And off they went to work, and the landowner went about his business.

And then we read that the landowner went back to the marketplace, about nine o'clock – so the first lot of workers would have had a couple of hours of hard work under their belts by then. And in the marketplace, the landowner finds other workers, and he recruits them, too. No discussion of how much

they'll get paid this time, just an assurance that he would pay whatever was right. And he hired them, and they went up the hillside to the vineyard too.

And the landowner repeats his visit at noon and three o'clock. Each time, he hires more and more workers. Each time, they go and join the other workers in the vineyard.

Finally, at about five o'clock he visits the marketplace for a fifth time, and finds more people standing around. So he's been there at daybreak, nine, noon and three, and there's still more people there. He asks them "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?"

We read in verse 7 that they said to him "Because no one has hired us". Which I guess is true... but maybe no one hired them because they weren't there to be hired, and we have to wonder why they weren't there to be hired. We don't know. Maybe they were busy caring for families, or they were sick – or maybe they were just lazy.

But strangely, the landowner said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' Strangely, because there's not a lot of light left, maybe an hour or a bit more of work only, but off they go and join all the others in the vineyard – those that have been there for a few hours, and those that would be well and truly into what we might think of as overtime.

And then in verse 8, the evening came and the landowner asks his foreman to call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last hired and then going to the first.

You'd think, perhaps, that you'd pay those who'd been there since early morning first, but no – the last get paid first – and amazingly, they get a whole denarius. The usual daily wage, but for only an hour's work. They would have been over the moon!

And seeing that, you can imagine that each of the other workers would be doing some mental arithmetic... if those later workers got a denarius, and you've been here for twice the time, well two denarii, and those who've been here since daybreak – well, they'll probably be staggering home under the weight of all the coins they're going to get paid.

But no, says Jesus, the end of verse 10 tells us that each of them also received a single denarius.

They did more work, three, four, maybe ten or twelve times the work of those latecomers... and yet, they got the same. A denarius. A day's wage.

This landowner is certainly not up with the ways of the world: The harder you work, the more you get. The longer you work, the more you get.

And being people of the world, the labourers weren't happy – we read in verses 11 and 12 that when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

It is not right. It is not fair. It just doesn't make sense.

But verse 13 and 14 explain the landowner's strange action: But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

His actions may not seem fair or sensible, but the landowner hasn't lied or misled or indeed underpaid anyone. He is the landowner, he has the money, why can't – why shouldn't – he pay who he likes what he likes?

Those who signed on first thing in the morning said "Yes, we'll work for you for the whole day for a denarius", and that's what the landowner gives them.

The money is the landowner's to give.

And he asks the workers in verse 15, "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Of course, we'd all agree that it's his money and he can do what he likes... up to a point. And we see it all the time in the world – people spending money in ways that we think are unwise – or on things that don't meet our approval.

The landowner asks the disgruntled workers "...are you envious because I am generous?"

The literal translation from the original Greek is "is your eye evil because I am good?"

Do you see evil in this goodness?

But it is envy, I think, that is key.

We criticise others because we are envious of them. They don't spend their money wisely... we'd do a much better job.

And I think we see it in wider society. Don't spend money on those things, spend it on these things that effect us!

Or perhaps even, don't spend it on them. Spend it on us, instead.

We see it whenever a federal budget is handed down... people ask 'but what's in it for me?' or maybe 'what's in it for my ...' whatever their favourite special interest group is.

Traditionally, there are calls for things like 'crack down on welfare recipients, and give wage earners a tax cut'.

Or 'Make them work for the dole. But keep the negative gearing allowance on our investment property in place'.

And so on it goes.

That's the way of the world.

But it's not the way of the kingdom of God.

God is the landowner, and God will take you into his kingdom in the morning, or in the afternoon or late in the day. And the reward that God offers to each one of us through the death and resurrection of Jesus is the same. It is life with him. Everlasting life.

In today's terms, God is the employer that doesn't check whether their employees get to work late, play video games, or Facebook, or surf the web on company time, even if they'd really prefer the employees didn't.

There are no key performance indicators for members of the kingdom of God. You get the reward, no matter how badly – or how well – you've performed. The one thing that matters, the only thing that matters, is being there at the end of the day.

All the workers in the vineyard were paid the same. And that was no less than anyone had agreed or been promised. But only the workers in the vineyard were paid. If they'd never gone to the marketplace and accepted the landowner's offer and gone to the vineyard, there was no reward.

That's how it is with us as followers of Jesus. It doesn't matter when we accepted Jesus' offer, it matters that we did.

I reflect that as a young person, I'd wandered to the marketplace, I'd peered over the fence of the vineyard, and wandered off again. In 1993, I was in the marketplace and accepted the offer, and I joined the other workers in the vineyard – and I can tell you, that a few of the people who'd been there an awfully long time resented my arrival. He's only a new Christian – why should we include him?

At the end of the day, though, we are all there together. The early arrivals, and the late arrivals.

We need to be conscious of being envious of God's generosity – and indeed being envious of the generosity of others.

We saw that clearly in our Old Testament reading from the book of Jonah. We probably know the story of Jonah – God called Jonah to “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” (Jonah 1:1), but Jonah, probably knowing what often happened to prophet, decided to run – and caught a ship headed to Tarshish instead.

A violent storm struck the ship, and Jonah realised it was because he was running from God, so he told the sailors to throw him overboard. Then Jonah was swallowed by a huge fish (which people often say was a whale), and spat him out onto dry land.

Then Jonah went to Nineveh and preached against it, as God had called him to do: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” And it worked! The Ninevites repented, and as we heard, in the last verse of chapter 3, “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.”

Hallelujah! Great news, right?

As we heard though, Jonah didn't take it that way. After all he'd been through – the storm, the fish, walking into danger in Nineveh to preach the word of God... God hadn't destroyed Nineveh as Jonah has preached. Jonah was angry. But the Lord replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?” (Jonah 4:4)

And this lesson for Jonah, and for us, plays out in the reading. Why should Jonah be angry – wasn't it a good outcome? In fact, wasn't it the best possible outcome? Nineveh was doomed... and then Nineveh was saved.

But to Jonah, like those workers recruited from the marketplace in the early morning, it wasn't fair. Nineveh should have been destroyed. The workers who had worked fewer hours should have been paid less than those who had laboured all day.

But God's generosity to Nineveh prevailed. The landowner's generosity to the workers prevailed.

God's question to Jonah "Is it right for you to be angry?" echoes in the landowner's question to the grumbling workers at the end of the day "...are you envious because I am generous?"

We work for God not in order to earn his favour, we work for God – labour in God's vineyard – because we have God's favour.

So often though, it just doesn't seem fair...

Do we look around and see other congregations or denominations apparently doing better than we are? Are we envious because they have more people, or a more even demographic spread, or a higher profile in the community?

Do we find ourselves being envious because God is generous?

When we get down to it, none of us deserve God's generosity. Some of us might work longer, or give more, or pray more regularly, or have been serving God for much longer... but as Paul says to the Romans, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God – and we all need God's grace and forgiveness.

Things might not be fair, if we measure things by the standards of the world.

We need to step back, and not view things as the world views them... we need to step back and see God's great generosity to each one of us, and to us all.

And we need to think: Where will we be at the end of the day?

Amen